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### The Isolated Painter

Isolated from the sand of time and from the purity of my artistic abilities, I sat close to my cell wall and followed the nearby candlelight that swayed back and forth with my eyes. These are eyes of observation, eyes of imagination, and eyes of insight. They remained wide open; like an unhealed wound from a sword, the only difference is that these eyes haven't healed but instead carried the weight of past mistakes, of sketches abandoned and life erased. As the moon streamed from the only window in my cell, shadows danced, whether it would be the trees or the birds, nature always put on an exquisite play every night. The only company I had were the rats that would come from time to time and as they squeezed through the iron bars, we would share the two meals I got from the prison guards, and even sneak some crumbs for the ones that saw me when I labored for the day. Labor was always intensive; mining, farming, and shoveling for sixteen hours was no easy task; but my favorite aspect of those activities was the breeze of the wind and daydreaming of what I could be creating if I were back in Paris with my easel and canvas. The night was my time to think, create, and lose myself in silence, the silence of death. And with a cool breeze from the window, the flame of the candle was extinguished, and the gunshot was set off starting the never-ending horse race.

As I lay here thinking about my past, I thought about the paintings I have created. The labor, the intellect, and the physical effort I poured into my work created a sense of isolation between myself and the subject. That is how I got here in the first place. Interpretation was the cause of all evil, and if I could write a book for all the paintings I've created; then there would be no room for interpretation, only the historical and scientific notions of my work. Take Greek

philosophy, for example. Without debate or dialogue between Aristotle and Plato, their work would be left open to endless interpretation. In fact, philosophy would change altogether and the same would apply to art as an expression. In philosophical matters; wouldn't architecture, mathematics, or anything shaped by intellect, and physical efforts be considered art? Debate shapes most human endeavors, making interpretation merely a byproduct of creation. Some say that art is a useless skill, but would that imply that all skills are useless? If everything humans create holds both value and utility, then doesn't labor itself possess intrinsic worth? Perhaps, if isolation had value, it would be its ability to deepen and redefine the worth of what is already created.

The artist's primary goal is expression, yet that expression is always shaped by the world around them. The world, in a sense, molds the artist's work which raises the question: can there ever be an escape from the isolation that art creates? Since the artist is shaped by the Earth and expresses themselves within its framework, the interpretation of that art lies in the artist's hands. This brings me to the concept of infinity, a mathematical expression that suggests art, too, is infinite. My possibilities as an artist become limitless, expanding into an unfathomable vastness. This realization balances expression and interpretation within an infinite cycle, where every idea or interpretation is part of an endless web of possibilities. As a result, the notion of isolation loses its relevance. In the realm of infinity, artistic isolation no longer imprisons, it becomes part of the never-ending dialogue of interpretation and expression. However, even within this infinite expanse, the artist remains constrained by the limits of human perception. Though forever part of this cycle, the artist can never fully break free. While this thought offers both comfort and undeniable truth, art, by nature, remains bound by the very constraints that give it life.

As the sun rose, I realized my own thoughts had imprisoned me just as much as these cell walls. Birds chirped in the distance, and the familiar sound of rats scurrying echoed through the

damp stone. I gripped the iron bars, their rusted surface cold as hell, and watched as two guards approached with my morning rations. Without a word, one slid a tray beneath my cell door; a bruised apple, two eggs, and a slice of stale bread. Silence followed. As always, I tore off a piece of bread and fed it to the rats, their eager squeaks summoning more of their kind. When I finished eating, I took a sip of the stale water I had saved from the night before, steeling myself for another grueling day of forced labor. A guard's jangling keys echoed down the corridor. The cell door groaned as he unlocked it, and without hesitation, he grabbed my arm. "Come with me, scum. It's time for work," he sneered. I exhaled sharply. "Where's the location today?" His voice dropped to a low, almost indifferent murmur. "Quarry." With that, he shoved me forward and slammed the cell door shut behind us. The lock clicked into place, sealing my fate for yet another day.

In the oppressive heat and with exhaustion weighing me down, I swung the pickaxe at a massive rock in the quarry. My clothes were drenched in sweat, and the chains around my ankles rubbed against my skin, their friction burning with every step. It was a normal day for me now, I've been here for two years, keeping to myself, isolated as if I were a disease. I suppose that's what happens when you stand for something too strongly. A single painting led me here. I had a life, I was a professor, full of passion. And now, just like that, it's all gone. All because of a painting of my colleagues holding a document that read, "Viva de Paris Commune." I often wonder about the progress of the commune, what has it really achieved? With Prussian guards watching over me, I can't help but think that time may be running out. Every day, I lose weight, my beard grows longer, and the cracks in my hands fester into blisters. If there was a chance to escape, I would take it. For now, all I have is myself and the dreams that come to me when I sleep.

After eight hours, a guard walked past me, escorting another prisoner. An old man with a long white scraggly beard and a book in his hand. He kind of reminded me of when I was a kid, reading those books about wizards and mystical creatures. As the old man passed, he dropped his book, I picked it up, realizing it was a bible. With intent to say something about his mishap, he had vanished into the quarry's distance. I haven't read a book since I got here and though I'm not religious, I figured it would do me some good to pass the time. After all, it's better than staring at a wall in my cell, or the empty cells that surround me. Two hours passed, and a guard came to take me off my duty for dinner. He asked, "where did you get that book?" and with a shocking confused look, I replied, "I found it in quarry, sir." "It'll do you some good," he chuckled, "but the Lord's not on your side." Looking down at my feet with the book still in my hand, he grabbed me by the arm and led me back into the building and escorted me back into my cell or rather, my cage.

As usual, the guard returned with my evening meal; a bruised apple, some poorly sliced pork, and a cob of corn. He also took my water bucket and refilled it. The rats, as always, came racing toward me, hoping I'd share. Without surprise, I did. I gave them the leftover pieces of corn, and I could tell they appreciated my charity, just like the old man with his Bible. Ah, yes, the Old Testament. I remember when my parents used to take me to church. I'd sketch in the Bible they gave me, pretending to listen, but the time spent with them was still special to me. When they passed, I promised myself that my art would be for humanity, that it would inspire and help progress. Now, opening this Bible brings back all those memories. After reading a few chapters, I finished my meager meal, and a guard came to take me back to labor again for another six hours.

Barely keeping my eyes open, I shoveled tirelessly, digging a moat around the fortress. I've been at the deep trench for over a year now, and the guards say it's for security reasons.

Personally, I think it's a waste of time. If an army were going to invade, it would've happened by now, and with my luck, it still hasn't. As the sun sets low a cool breeze rolls in, I can't help but consider this my favorite part of the day. I love listening to the evening wildlife; The owls, the wolves, and even the vultures that come out, it's as if they warn their prey before hunting. With a hoot or a howl, the smaller critters know it's time to find shelter. I think that's why most of my fellow comrades are here, to be protected, isolated.

Looking up at the night sky, I watched the stars emerge to say hello, and from the corner of my eye, I even caught a shooting star. I remember when I was studying at the School of Fine Arts in Paris, reading about Greek mythology, especially the Titan god Crius, "The Pillar of the South." I've always found it fascinating how the Greeks used such insight in their quest for the truth. Truth, of course, inspired many to transcend the isolation one might feel, to build character, and to dream of something greater instead of resigning themselves to the comfort of contentment. The Egyptians, too, were unique in this pursuit. It was their artistic drive, beyond mere capability, that propelled them to discover symbols, geometry, and the truth of the afterlife.

When I could no longer dig, darkness having swallowed the last of the light, the guard came stomping over, his torch casting wild shadows across the dirt. Without a word, he grabbed my arm and yanked me back to my cell. After locking me in, he turned towards the prison's entrance. Then, a high-pitched squeal cut through the silence, echoing in the dark. "Blasphemy! God shouldn't have created you beasts!" the guard bellowed. I found this amusing. But at the same time, I felt a pinch of sympathy, he must have stepped on or tripped over one of my comrades. The door slammed shut behind him, leaving me alone once more, with nothing but a flickering candle to keep me company.

At least I had this Bible. If it weren't for that old man, I might have spent the night staring at the candle flame, watching the wax slowly melt as time passed. Instead, I flipped the book open once more and landed on the passage of Adam and Eve. This story stood out among the others. How had the world been populated? Adam and Eve must have reproduced, otherwise, I wouldn't be here. But then again, God created everything, didn't he? The universe, the stars...Yet all of it is shaped by an image, an image crafted by man, a mere expression of something greater. But can an expression ever explain everything? Did the old man drop this book by accident, or was there meaning behind this possession?

Perhaps it was mere coincidence, but even so, it deepens the richness of the questions I have about art. For that, I am forever in the old man's debt. If only I had the chance to speak with him, perhaps he was wise. Sharing insights between two minds could have been enlightening, but that opportunity is gone. At least, for now. The only mind I have is my own, and the rats in this cage. That is my reality. Not one of contentment, but of adaptation, much like adjusting to the changing seasons. If a person can adapt to confinement, then surely, they can adapt to any condition that shapes artistic expression. Unless, of course, they choose to defy it.

Does God have artistic value within the realm of artistic expression? I mean, on the edge of death or as the source of intelligence God is in the picture, right? But if God were to be looked at with an artistic lens, we would see that religion itself is the creation of man and with its art as its value, God can be used as an expression to shape debate. I remember the painting by Leonardo Davinci called "The Last Supper" and always found that work entrancing. Was that the last supper of Jesus Christ? Or was that an expression of a man who wanted to bring the son of

God to life? The point is, how am I supposed to let an expression guide my life if I have my interpretation of a creation? That brings me to the thought of the devil. If the images “Heaven” and “Hell” are places where humans go, depending on their actions on Earth, that would mean actions are determinates of what's “good” and “bad” within the eyes of the creator, human beings. Ah! Yes, exactly. Religion itself is a determination of isolation shaped by an image of expression, and the interpretation dictates its meaning without debate. Thus, this would mean that my expressions are not just merely wrong but are also trapped in an interpretation and that brings me to my next question. Is an artist forever trapped within their art?

As the sun rose again, daylight crept into my cell, inch by inch, casting long shadows across the damp stone. A faint echoed in the stillness; chewing, squeaking. I sat up, my senses sharpening. Scattered across the floor, both inside and outside my cell, were torn pages. My eyes traced the destruction until they landed on the Bible shredded to bits. At its center, a rat gnawed away at the verses of God himself. I snatched the remains of the book, and the rat scurried into a crack in the stone wall. My fingers brushed over the torn pages, the once-sacred words now nothing more than chewed pulp, stripped of their power. As I gathered the mess, a sudden slam jolted me. The iron door groaned, and the familiar rhythm of stomping boots and clanking keys filled the corridor. The guard was approaching.

His whistle rang out, casual, oblivious. But then, his foot caught on the scattered pages. In an instant, he was airborne. A sickening thud. The keys clattered to the floor. He didn't move. I waited, heart hammering, watching his chest rise and fall. Still breathing. Unconscious. The keys lay just out of reach. I seized the tray he had brought me and stretched as far as I could, scraping it against the floor. Three seconds. The keys inched closer. Three more. I glanced at the

guard, still out, like a baby slipping to sleep after a full meal. One last reach, metal scraped metal, and the keys were mine. The lock clicked open. Stepping over the guard, I crouched and unholstered his gun. The weight of it felt unfamiliar, yet right. Before leaving, I looked back into my cell. The rat was still feasting on the word of God. I nudged the last scraps of food toward him. “For your service,” I muttered, then turned toward the entrance of the prison.

As I stepped outside, the cold air bit my skin. Guards stood scattered across the yard, their movements sharp and practiced. I pressed myself against the wall, waiting. They always went back inside after checking the perimeter. Seconds dragged on. Then an opening. I darted past the quarry, my breath ragged. The moat I had dug loomed ahead. I leaped, almost cleared it. Mud swallowed my boots, dampening my legs, but I pulled myself up, heart thumping like a wild horse on the run. Two years. Two years inside those walls, and now, I was free. I took a breath, steadying myself. The world beyond the prison stretched before me like an untouched canvas. That's when I realized, an artist is never trapped within their art. It's the isolation that chains them, the confinement, the loneliness. I turned my back on the prison and ran into the woods, into my next painting.